



Ensuring All Immigrant & Refugee Professionals Can Fully Contribute Their Skills

An estimated [two million](#) college-educated, work-authorized immigrants and refugees are either unemployed or underemployed in the U.S. They are unable to fully contribute in-demand skills and experience for complex and interrelated reasons: the lack of recognition of their international education and experience, outdated occupational and professional recertification processes, and unequal and insufficient access to meaningful workforce development and adult education services.

Underutilization of this talent leaves these professionals struggling to provide for themselves and their families. It also affects all Americans, to the tune of [\\$39.4 billion](#) in foregone earnings and [\\$10.2 billion](#) in lost federal, state, and local taxes. It also keeps essential, urgently-needed skills and experience out of our workforce at this critical time.

Below are stories that illustrate the scope of the challenge -- and the urgency of federal-level support to understand and address the systemic barriers that stymie the contributions of immigrants and refugees with professional credentials earned outside the United States.

- [Ahmad](#) was an experienced anesthesiologist in Afghanistan, tapped by the U.S. Army to train Afghan medical personnel during the height of the conflict in his home country. When his work with the U.S. military made him a Taliban target, he was awarded a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) to come to the United States. Yet Dr. Momand's professional trajectory stalled when he came to the U.S. Now living in Virginia, he works two jobs to provide for his family, neither of which makes full use of his life saving skill set.
- [John](#) was a financial professional in Venezuela, working at the top of his field before circumstances changed in his home country. After seeking political asylum in the U.S. and receiving work authorization, he worked a number of 'survival' jobs to provide for his wife and young daughter. He worked at a company that manufactured machinery for restaurants, and was grateful for the experience, but knew he had more to contribute to his new country and his family.
- [Dorca](#) was a celebrated human rights lawyer in her home country in West Africa -- until her work with incarcerated women and children made her a target. She began to receive threats from the government and was eventually abducted and tortured. After surviving the ordeal, she fled with her mother and children, and eventually applied for asylum in the U.S. She found work as a forklift operator at a local factory, but the minimum wage, long commute, and late nights were a strain for her family.

- **Neal** obtained his mechanical engineering degree in Iraq and worked for the Iraq Ministry of Trade. After it became unsafe for him and his family to safely stay in their home country, they spent two years in a refugee camp in Syria where Neal worked as an engineering tech. Once resettled in the U.S., however, Neal could only find work outside of his professional field and has been employed for almost a year in a food processing plant. Neal believed redoing his education in the U.S. -- getting the same mechanical engineering degree he already obtained in Iraq -- was the only way to find a full-time position as a mechanical engineer. Yet, even after obtaining another degree, Neal faced significant barriers to finding employment.
- **Lubab** and her husband and two daughters arrived in Houston, Texas in 2014 after fleeing violence in Iraq. Prior to having to flee, she earned her PhD and held a high-level position in the medical field as a pathologist. She spent six years after resettling in the United States trying to break back into the medical field, working as a cashier in a fast-food restaurant. Now, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, she leads a team of international doctors to conduct coronavirus tests in New York nursing homes. During the start of the pandemic, Lubab worked as a supervisor at a drive-thru COVID-19 testing center in Bergenfield, New Jersey. Now leading her team and testing in 10 different nursing homes, she is hopeful that there will be policy changes that allow her to practice even after the Covid-19 crisis passes.
- **Rasha** came to the United States in 2010, fleeing civil war in Sudan. Although she served as a primary care physician back in Sudan, she has been unable to practice medicine since arriving in the United States, despite all of her best efforts. Rasha has taken additional classes, retaken all her exams, and even spent a year working to get her EMT-Paramedic license. She has applied for a residency several times now, but has yet to be placed. Each residency application costs several thousand dollars, presenting financial difficulties for Rasha and her family. Her husband, who worked as an accountant in their home country, has also been unable to find work in his field in the U.S. and works as an Uber driver. Rasha currently works at local hospitals in New York doing intake and COVID tests during the pandemic, and hopes that she will be able to practice medicine again in the future if new medical licensing laws are passed.

For more information, contact:

- **Jacki Esposito**, Director, US Policy and Advocacy, World Education Services, jesposito@wes.org
- **Sara McElmurry**, Director of Communications, Policy & Research, Upwardly Global: saram@upwardlyglobal.org
- **Meredith Owen**, Deputy Director of Policy and Advocacy, Immigration and Refugee Program, Church World Service, mowen@cwsglobal.org